

# PBS wins, the poor lose

By David S. Broder

WASHINGTON -- The victory that public television won last week, when the House restored the committee-mandated 25 percent cut in its funds, came at a price. That price will be paid, as is so often the case in today's Washington, by the people who depend on government help for essential health care and education and job-training services.

In reversing the \$100 million reduction the Appropriations Committee had ordered in the \$400 million budget of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the House did not -- because it could not under its own rules -- increase the overall spending for programs in the departments of Health and Human Services, Education and Labor.

So the sponsors of the amendment to bail out public television had no choice but to find the money elsewhere in the same bill, and that meant cutting programs and services.

No one was happy about the situation. Rep. David Obey of Wisconsin, who sponsored the amendment to restore the public broadcasting money, along with fellow Democrat Nita Lowey of New York and Iowa Republican Jim Leach, said before the vote, "I believe our amendment today will pass, but even if it does, I would hope that the members of this House ... would understand that this is far from the most important issue in this bill."

"The most important thing about this bill is what it does to hurt the future of our children, what it does to avoid meeting the needs of people in this society who are sick and without health insurance ... our workers in the world economy."

Obey's complaint was directed at the overall spending limits in the bill. He had written an amendment to boost spending in the \$602 billion bill by \$11.8 billion, to be offset by reducing the tax cut for millionaires from an average of \$140,000 this year to \$36,000. It was defeated on a party-line vote in the Appropriations Committee, and the Republican majority on the Rules Committee barred its consideration on the floor.

But the cuts required to offset the restoration of \$100 million public broadcasting funds only deepened the problem. As Ralph Regula, the Ohio Republican who headed the Appropriations subcommittee that drafted the bill, said, more than half the \$100 million came out of the Labor Department's training and employment services. "That takes away from young people's

training opportunities," he said, especially programs that give the large number of high school dropouts "a chance later on, as they realize their mistake in not finishing high school," to qualify for credentials that can bring living-wage jobs.

There was a small nick -- about \$3 million -- in health programs and a much bigger whack at higher education funds -- \$27 million. Not devastating in themselves, they are an added burden to systems facing severe cutbacks in the underlying bill.

Those cuts, as detailed in a memo from Obey's staff, include a 50 percent cut in the Community College Initiative from the current year, despite those colleges' critical role in upgrading workers' skills; a similar cut in Community Services Block Grants that provide housing, child care and emergency food assistance to the needy; and -- despite administration promises to enforce labor standards in the pending Central American Free Trade Agreement -- an 87 percent cut in the International Labor Affairs Bureau. And the list goes on.

None of this suggests that the House was wrong to rescue Big Bird and his friends in public broadcasting. But it is a fact, as both Regula and Obey pointed out, that the broadcast stations and their audiences have far more influence on Congress than most low-income Americans possess. As Obey put it, "At least the people who pay attention to public broadcasting do have a megaphone of sorts, and they can get their message known."

Obey was also on sound ground in pointing out that "the press has focused 90 percent of its attention on public broadcasting," downplaying or ignoring the trade-offs that were forced in other programs by the strictures of the budget plan pushed by President Bush and approved by party-line Republican majorities in Congress.

*The New York Times* in its report on the House action made no mention of the offsetting cuts. *The Washington Post* noted some of the program cuts in the overall bill, but linked none of them to the headlined victory for public broadcasting. *The Los Angeles Times* reported that the \$100 million "would be paid for with savings from unrelated federal education, health and labor programs" -- a notably antiseptic and vague description.

It's one more instance of the prevailing political culture -- controlled by a budgetary and tax system that puts the lowest value on the needs of those who are most vulnerable.

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